

Educational Leadership Goes to the Movies: Doctoral Students' Reflection on Theory through Popular Film

Charles L. Lowery

Virginia Tech

Alessandra Fehrman-Prestipino

Virginia Tech

Andrew Fox

Virginia Tech

Dana Fox

Virginia Tech

Tiffany House

Virginia Tech

Aaron Palmer

Q.U.E.S.T. Program, Northampton County Public Schools

*This article explores how popular film can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool for advancing doctoral students' theoretical understanding of educational leadership. Drawing on Dewey's aesthetics and Hutcheon's concept of poetics, the project positioned film as a medium through which metaphor, narrative, and symbolic representation disrupt conventional thinking and reveal new perspectives on leadership. Within a doctoral course on educational administration, students analyzed non-educational films, producing vignettes that examined characters' leadership traits and organizational contexts through frameworks such as transformational, authentic, democratic, and social justice leadership. The collaborative process of synthesizing these reflections into a co-constructed manuscript exemplified experiential learning and collective knowledge-building. Analyses of characters such as Usnavi (*In the Heights*), Chuckie (*Good Will Hunting*), Simba (*The Lion King*), Conor O'Neill (*Hardball*), and Dalton (*Road House*) revealed both formal and informal leadership practices, underscoring the complexities of identity, power, ethics, and change. Findings highlight film's capacity to engage students emotionally and intellectually, fostering moral imagination, critical literacy, and reflexive praxis. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how cinematic storytelling can bridge theory and practice, enabling educational leaders to reinterpret their roles with greater authenticity, creativity, and ethical awareness.*

Keywords: educational leadership, experiential learning, moral imagination, theoretical praxis

Over the past several decades, scholars of educational leadership have increasingly recognized the pedagogical value of integrating *popular culture* into academic curricula (Giroux, 2004; hooks, 1994; Jenlink, 2015). Films, in particular, present vivid portrayals of leadership dynamics, power relations, social complexities, and organizational structures that can inform and inspire theoretical understanding in ways that go beyond traditional texts on educational administration. Although cinematic narratives may be fictional, they often feature protagonists confronting ethical dilemmas, group decision-making, authority, and accountability. We reason that such scenarios can closely mirror real-life challenges that educational leaders encounter in their practice.

Within this broader discussion on popular culture and leadership, elements of *poetics* provide an additional layer of insight. While poetics is commonly understood as “a form of criticism synonymous with literary theory or the theory of literature” (Genette, 2005), its relevance extends to various media forms, including film. In an Aristotelian sense, poetics functions as “a system of logic that imitates human actions by way of dialogue or narration” (Halliwell, 1998, p. 110), suggesting that cinematic storytelling—like dramatic or literary texts—can reveal universal aspects of human experience. Hutcheon (1988) defined poetics as “an open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures” (p. 14), implying that *metaphor* and *symbolic representation* in film can inspire new ways of seeing leadership.

This paper builds on these insights by proposing an innovative film-based assignment to deepen doctoral students’ understanding of educational leadership theory. In doing so, it draws from John Dewey’s (1988) reflections on creative expression as a form of “presentation” (p. 183). It stresses the evocative power of art to unsettle what he called “the crust of conventional and routine consciousness” (p. 183). Through the examination of films in varying genres (and particularly those *not* focused on education), students in an Educational Leadership program are encouraged to identify social attitudes, moral structures, political issues, and cultural complexities, then connect these observations to established frameworks such as transformational, servant, and authentic leadership.

Poetics of Leadership in Relation to Popular Culture

Although poetics originated in literary and dramatic criticism, scholars have long acknowledged its significance for broader cultural analysis (Ziolkowski, 1969). Hutcheon’s (1988) description of poetics as an “open, ever-changing theoretical structure” (p. 14) suggested that the methods used to interpret novels or poetry can also be applied to modern media like film. Instead of concentrating solely on textual form, a “poetics” can be understood as an approach to how stories, whether written, spoken, or visual, generate meaning, evoke emotions, and serve as metaphors relevant to various areas of human activity.

From an Aristotelian perspective, stories “imitate human actions” (Halliwell, 1998, p. 110), and it is precisely this mimetic aspect of cinema that makes it suitable for leadership analysis. Characters on screen navigate relationships, make strategic decisions, and face ethical dilemmas. All of which relate to concerns relevant to educational leaders. In this sense, the

poetic dimension of film lies in its ability to depict leadership scenarios that can be interpreted for deeper understanding, extending far beyond mere entertainment.

Deweyan Perspectives on Art as Presentation

John Dewey's work is instructive for connecting art and imagination to education—here, the poetics of educational leadership (Granger, 2001). As far back as the 1920s, Dewey (1988) addressed the problem of disseminating thought and information in a manner accessible to the public. (Although he was speaking primarily about scientific information, this can be said to apply to theoretical and philosophical, both pedagogical and political, thought as well.) For Dewey, artistic or creative expression was a possible remedy to this. He argued, “Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art” (p. 183). He went on to say,

The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventional and routine consciousness... poetry, drama, and the novel are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation. (pp. 183–184)

Although Dewey's words were written in the context of early twentieth-century media and literary forms, his argument still resonates with how films today can “break through” common assumptions, encouraging viewers to engage in reflective and imaginative thinking. By underscoring the *presentation* of leadership in cinematic plots, character development, and even production elements, viewers can, in Dewey's terms, experience a heightened “emotion, perception, and appreciation” (p. 184) that leads to new interpretive insights and different ways of knowing (Dei & Adhami, 2021).

Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Tool

The imaginative perspective of popular cinema provides a rich space for discovering connections between fictional narratives and real-world educational administration (Granger, 2001). Parallel to Dewey's emphasis on art, theorists such as hooks (1994) and Giroux (2004) have argued that popular culture offers opportunities for critical engagement. Viewing and analyzing films can encourage dialogue about social structures, power imbalances, and leadership ethics, helping students connect theoretical knowledge with critical, culturally relevant, and divergent narratives (Dei & Adhami, 2021). This approach is especially important in educational leadership, where policies, organizational hierarchies, and community relationships often unfold like cinematic stories.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle further supports this approach. Watching a film can serve as a *concrete experience* that prompts reflection. Students then move into conceptualization as they connect on-screen leadership scenarios to existing theories. As a result, in later discussions or written reflections, they may *test* these insights in their own leadership practices, continuously refining their theoretical perspectives through an ongoing, iterative process.

Furthermore, incorporating popular culture promotes an inclusive, student-focused teaching approach. By encouraging students to analyze well-known and familiar films, instructors leverage their existing background knowledge and motivation, helping to connect academic leadership theories with plausible, real-world examples. Although the films themselves may not show official schools or superintendents, their themes often reflect the complexities of educational governance and management.

Metaphorical Insight and Leadership

A key contribution of poetics to the study of leadership in film is its focus on metaphor as a tool for making meaning. In movies, vital leadership themes (e.g., shared vision, ethical responsibility, the tension between authority and collaboration, etc.) may not be stated outright. Instead, they appear through character arcs, set designs, dialogue, and symbolic elements that suggest analogy. These metaphors can be especially impactful for educational leaders, who often grapple with abstract ideas like equity, community engagement, and transformative change. By using cinematic metaphors, viewers can identify parallel structures in their own practice, what in curriculum studies might be seen as the *hidden* or *overlooked* parts of leadership knowledge.

For example, a corporate thriller that reveals hidden agendas and breaches of trust can shed light on the more subtle forms of conflict resolution and stakeholder negotiation that educational leaders face. Similarly, a sci-fi epic depicting a diverse alliance's fight for survival can reflect the inclusive and visionary leadership required in a school district aiming for systemic reforms. In each case, the poetic element, or the deliberate use of metaphor, symbolism, and storytelling, helps viewers see beyond surface actions to understand the deeper leadership dynamics involved.

Integrating Film Analysis into Leadership Development

Positioning film within a poetics-inspired reading of popular culture allows cinematic stories to serve as meaningful tools for applying theory and examining leadership principles. The creative space of fiction is not just escapist. Engaging one's moral imagination can help leadership reflexively consider moral complexities in society, reexamine hidden power dynamics in organizations, and catalyze cognitive and emotional responses that deepen one's engagement with practice and relevant theories.

Building on Dewey's concept of art as a means for public engagement and Hutcheon's (1988) view of poetics as a versatile framework for interpreting cultural works, the film-based assignment outlined in this paper aims to enhance doctoral students' understanding of leadership theory. Through an analysis of film characters and situations rich with content, students sharpen their understanding of key leadership models, such as transformational, servant, authentic, and others, and explore how these models might be reinterpreted or expanded when faced with new contexts.

Our Methods

Context and Participants

This project originated within an introductory course, *Theories of Educational Administration*, offered at the doctoral level in an Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. Participants in the course include a diverse group of practicing and aspiring educational leaders, most of whom were working in K–12 or higher education while pursuing their doctoral degrees. As part of their coursework, students explored key leadership theories—ranging from transformational and distributed leadership to critical and ethical frameworks—to develop a foundational understanding of educational administration.

Overview of the Assignment

Against this theoretical backdrop, students were assigned a *film-based project* designed to enhance their ability to apply leadership theories to new settings. Specifically, each student chose and watched a *non-education-related film* featuring a prominent *leader* (broadly defined). The assignment required a brief, 1- to 1½-page vignette and asked students to focus on the following.

1. Identify the film and justify the choice from a leadership perspective.
2. Describe salient leadership behaviors or attitudes demonstrated by a main character, considering their effective and ineffective traits as well as their successes and failures.
3. Analyze the organizational or contextual structure in which the leader operated, noting how it influenced decision-making.
4. Construct a preliminary theoretical framework connecting observed leadership traits and structures to established theories (e.g., transformational, authentic, servant leadership).

Students then wrote a short reflection (2–3 sentences) describing how this exercise improved their understanding of leadership theory and its practical relevance.

Co-Constructed Scholarly Product

The final project, of which this paper is a part, was developed as a *collaborative, co-constructed effort* among the course participants and the instructor. Each student’s film analysis acted as an independent example of leadership “in action” within a cinematic narrative. After completing their individual vignettes and reflections, students engaged in a structured, iterative process to merge their insights into a unified scholarly piece. This process included initial compilation, collaborative review, revision, and the creation of the final manuscript.

To accomplish this, the instructor gathered all student vignettes and organized them by emerging themes (e.g., ethical dilemmas, power hierarchies, group cohesion). The class then participated in group discussions—conducted during synchronous online meetings—examining

how specific leadership concepts, such as moral literacy or transformational approaches, were demonstrated across different films. Under the instructor's guidance, key observations were combined into draft sections (e.g., commonalities in leader decision-making, differences in organizational culture, connections to existing leadership theories). Students volunteered or were chosen to improve each section, ensuring multiple perspectives contributed to the developing manuscript. Successive drafts of the article were circulated among all contributors. Students provided feedback on clarity, theoretical consistency, and references to relevant literature. The instructor oversaw final editorial decisions, ensuring coherence across sections and adherence to scholarly standards.

In this way, the paper became a *collective artifact of learning*, with each student's contribution woven into the final narrative. As part of this co-authoring process, students gained not only a deeper understanding of leadership theories but also valuable experience in collaborative scholarly writing.

Pedagogical Underpinnings

The pedagogical design was guided by Deweyan principles on the power of art and creative expression to stimulate thought (Dewey, 2005) and by the idea that metaphorical analyses of fictional works can shed light on real-world dynamics (Alexander, 2016; Haskins, 2018; Vaamonde, 2023). This combination of Deweyan aesthetics, symbolic analysis, moral literacy, and experiential learning sets the stage for the following sections, which explain how doctoral students in educational leadership programs used non-educational films to create meaningful connections between popular culture and the relationships among theory, practice, and research in educational leadership (Jenlink, 2015; Jubas, 2023). Here, that guiding philosophy influenced the collection of reflective and reflexive data (in the form of student writing) and the data synthesis (collaborative integration) phases of the project (Brookfield, 2000; Ng et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2020; Qin, 2024).

Throughout the assignment, students employed various strategies to ensure that the cinematic examples served not only as entertainment but also as tools for analyzing and reconsidering key ideas in educational leadership (Rajpopat, 2023; Tebaldi & Nygreen 2022). For instance, as they watched the film, they took notes on specific scenes, character choices, organizational dynamics, and moral conflicts, explicitly connecting these observations to leadership principles. After viewing, group discussions, whether in person or online forums, focused on how these concepts were present or absent in the film. This encouraged students to *interpret their initial impressions* through a leadership perspective rather than just emotional reactions (Jubas et al., 2020). Lastly, students sometimes *compared two or more films* that shared themes, such as crisis management or organizational culture, but depicted different leadership behaviors. This method emphasized that cinema is not one-dimensional, illustrating how different artistic choices and genres can highlight dispositions or conceal aspects of leadership through character development.

Jointly, these strategies ensured that cinematic examples were used not just for entertainment but as tools for in-depth, theory-based exploration. By actively engaging with leadership concepts, taking notes, participating in structured reflective dialogue, and

connecting cinematic scenarios to real-world educational settings, the doctoral students gained a deeper understanding of how leadership theories can be applied and critically analyzed in various contexts (Dei & Adhami, 2021).

Data Analysis and Collaboration

For this project, data analysis refers to the collective process where the class interpreted and confirmed findings from students' vignettes with the instructor's guidance. Since the final article is a co-constructed reflective inquiry rather than a formal research study with structured qualitative coding, the analysis was mainly emergent and dialogic. In practice, the instructor and students identified patterns of leadership dilemmas or organizational issues that appeared across multiple films. Students observed contrasts in cinematic portrayals of leadership styles ranging from authoritarian to collaborative. They also identified both explicit and implicit links to the various theoretical frameworks studied in class (such as authentic, democratic, liminal, Black feminist, transformational, Foucauldian, and Bourdieusian theories).

These observations were presented as vignettes that shaped the collaboratively written synthesis, forming the main discussion in later sections. Although no formal coding protocol (such as open, axial, and selective) was used, iterative feedback loops, including group discussions and peer review of drafts, served to address agreement and dependability (Hoffman, 2020). This ensured that a variety of student perspectives were included and accurately represented, and that the dialogic data were carefully taken into account through multiple voices, co-construction, subjectivity, reflection, and dialogic interplay (Sullivan, 2012). This process ultimately improved the *trustworthiness* of the co-constructed article by leveraging the collective insights and reflections of all co-authors.

Ethical Considerations

In line with academic integrity and respect for intellectual property, students agreed to share their written work to collectively achieve the goal of creating this manuscript. The film analyses focused on publicly available material (commercially distributed movies) and did not involve human subjects; therefore, no further institutional review, such as IRB approval, was needed. Co-authors reserved the right to withdraw their contributions at any time, though no one did so.

Student Vignettes on Leadership Theory

Alessandra's Reflection on In the Heights

Usnavi as a Transformative Leader. *In the Heights* (Hudes, 2021) is set in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in New York City. In the film, the protagonist, Usnavi, demonstrates transformative and social justice leadership qualities. Usnavi guides a diverse group of people who worry that their community's culture and vibrancy are fading. He intentionally navigates and utilizes capital and human resources as he works collaboratively with various neighborhood

stakeholders. Despite their differences, these individuals share a common goal of supporting their community. Usnavi fosters resilience among his neighbors and promotes initiatives that break down barriers affecting marginalized groups. In doing so, he typifies qualities of a leader committed to social justice and transformative ideals.

Usnavi balances what can be considered competing leadership challenges as he supports neighbors who are working to address internal community issues while also assisting with situations that affect the well-being of community members outside the neighborhood. School administrators must also navigate these challenges as they balance meeting the needs of the school community while upholding district initiatives and federal mandates. The protagonist encourages his followers to engage in thoughtful reflection to make decisions that promote inclusivity and access for everyone. Usnavi advocates for policies and actions that celebrate the diversity of his neighborhood.

Similar to Usnavi, I am a reflective, collaborative, and resilient educator who encourages divergent thinking and constructive conversations to foster growth and increase engagement. As an educator and administrator, I strive to lead with transformative and social justice practices to uphold and strengthen systems that promote inclusive and equitable opportunities. This assignment helped me analyze how leaders in different scenarios outside of educational settings handle various challenges and circumstances, as well as the diverse ways leadership traits can be applied.

Dana's Narrative Analysis of Good Will Hunting

Chuckie as a Leader. Often, when people discuss the film *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant, 1997), conversations tend to focus on the mentorship between Will Hunting (Matt Damon) and Sean Maguire (Robin Williams) or on the influence of Professor Gerald Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård). However, a closer look at the film's interpersonal dynamics reveals Chuckie Sullivan (Ben Affleck) as a key leader among his friends. Despite having a more minor role compared to the intellectual and professional impact of the other main characters, Chuckie's leadership qualities, both positive and negative, stand out in critical moments throughout the story.

This analysis examines Chuckie's leadership within established frameworks, including transformational leadership, democratic leadership, and the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid. By analyzing Chuckie's actions and decisions, we can better understand how informal leadership manifests in everyday settings and how these leadership styles impact group cohesion, motivation, and moral growth.

Set in the Boston area, the story follows Will Hunting, a brilliant young man with a genius-level IQ, working as a janitor at a prestigious university despite his extraordinary intellect. After anonymously solving a highly complex math problem, Professor Gerald Lambeau, a faculty member at the college, takes a special interest in developing Will's intellectual potential. When Will gets into legal trouble for attacking a police officer, Lambeau arranges for him to receive leniency on the condition that he undergo therapy with Sean Maguire, a community college psychologist dealing with his own personal history of loss.

Amid these intense intellectual and emotional journeys, the film also focuses on the close-knit group of friends in Will's working-class neighborhood. Chuckie Sullivan is Will's best

friend. He works construction, looks out for his buddies, and has a loyalty-driven view on life that influences how he leads and supports the group.

Why Chuckie? While Sean Maguire and Professor Lambeau often attract the most attention for their mentorship roles, Chuckie appears as a more subtle but crucial leader. From small decisions, such as where the group will hang out on a particular night, to deeper moral insights about Will's future, Chuckie shows a unique mix of practicality, care, and honesty. In a way, he leads from within the group rather than from above or outside it, which can be explained through different leadership theories.

Transformational Leadership. Chuckie demonstrates elements of transformational leadership through the way he guides and supports Will. He consistently shares his hopes for Will, most notably in the "best ten seconds of my day" speech, where he encourages Will to leave their stagnant neighborhood and fully realize his potential. This moment underscores Chuckie's ability to inspire someone else's future while showing genuine care. He also provides ongoing emotional and practical support, such as picking Will up from jail or ensuring the group's basic needs, like food and drink, are met. These actions reflect a leader who, though informal, aims to see his friend's life improve.

Democratic Leadership. Chuckie often uses a participatory style in group decisions. He lets others, including the less dominant friends, express their preferences about where to go or how to handle specific situations, even if he privately disagrees. In one case, when Will insists on stopping the car, Chuckie obeys, despite his reservations, which ultimately results in Will's arrest. This willingness to accept group input, including sometimes giving in to others' wishes, demonstrates a democratic leadership approach, even in a casual, social environment.

Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid: "Country Club Management". On the Blake-Mouton Grid, Chuckie's style might best fit into the "Country Club Management" quadrant, characterized by high concern for people and lower concern for production or efficiency. Chuckie values taking care of his friends, creating a relaxed, enjoyable environment, and maintaining loyalty. Sometimes, his team lacks direction or productivity. He may not push them to reach ambitious goals, yet he always prioritizes their well-being. In a small group setting, this can be both a strength, fostering camaraderie, and a weakness, potentially limiting accountability and structured progress.

Authentic Leadership Traits. Chuckie also exhibits elements of authentic leadership. He never makes excuses for who he is or tries to hide his background and values. His straightforwardness with Will, by honestly telling him he's wasting his potential if he stays stuck, demonstrates relational transparency. Chuckie's willingness to speak uncomfortable truths shows his integrity: he wants Will to embrace a better life, even if it means leaving their familiar neighborhood and friendship behind.

Tiffany's Narrative Reflection in The Lion King

The Zigzag Path to Authentic and Transformational Leadership. The analysis of the classic film *The Lion King* (Allers, 1994) was a nostalgia-driven choice, driven by my love and admiration for children's movies. It is a fondness reinforced by my roles in elementary education as both an educator and school administrator. As a child, the circle of life served as the movie's central theme and was a catchy tune I often sang, to my parents' dismay. However, my years in education have given me new experiences and knowledge that allow me to see this classic film from a modern and unconventional perspective.

The circle of life is no longer framed by "Hakuna Matata" and "Can You Feel the Love Tonight?" Life becomes less like a circle and more like zigzags. Simba's journey to leadership was marked by unexpected turns and events that altered the course of his path. From an educational leader's perspective, I analyzed Simba's cyclical process of finding, losing, and rediscovering himself as a leader.

In the movie, Mufasa, Simba's father, trained the young cub to rule the Pride Lands. The organizational hierarchy of the Pride Lands includes a king who governs the land and animals, at least up to the point where the light touches. The king is responsible for maintaining order and the cyclic relationship between animals. Lions sit at the top of the hierarchy, while hyenas are at the bottom. The succession of a capable king is crucial to prevent a disgruntled Scar and his hyenas from seizing the throne. This organizational structure serves as the model that Simba uses to evaluate his leadership effectiveness.

Mufasa worked tirelessly to teach his son, Simba, the leadership skills necessary to be an effective king. Unfortunately, Simba's immaturity led to unrealistic expectations of a leader's role. He believed leaders were entitled to do and take whatever they wanted. The lion cub's overconfidence in his leadership abilities led to many misadventures. These mishaps shaped his values and beliefs as a leader, an essential part of authentic leadership. The death of his father became a pivotal life event that affected his leadership. Simba believed it was his fault that his father died. This perception caused crippling shame that drove him to run away from his duties as the next king. Eventually, Rafiki and the ghost of his father helped Simba accept and remember "who he is." After embracing his authentic self, Simba claimed his rightful place as king of the Pride Lands. As authentic leadership theory stresses, leaders must understand and be true to themselves when they lead.

The movie also illustrates transformational leadership as Simba learns that the Pride Lands have turned into a desert during his absence. While he was away, Scar and the hyenas changed the organizational hierarchy of the Pride Lands, with the lions now under Scar's rule and the hyenas holding power—a stark contrast to the previous animal rankings. Under Scar's leadership, the Pride Lands became a barren desert with few plants and animals due to overhunting. The circle of life lost its natural flow and took on a distorted shape. This shift in power motivated Simba to find the leader within himself and fight for change. He wanted to honor his father by rebuilding and preserving the leadership structure his father had maintained when he ruled.

Further examples of authentic leadership appear in the film as Simba discovers who he truly is and who he aspires to be as a leader. Driven by the desire to restore order and reinstate

the circle of life, Simba guides his followers with a clear purpose and vision for the future. Transparency, a key aspect of authentic leadership, is shown when Simba is honest with his friend Nala about his shame and feelings of inadequacy. Through this honesty, he confronts his fears and steps into his true power as king of the Pride Lands. He also demonstrates empathy by refusing to kill his uncle, who later reveals himself as Mufasa's killer.

The film also illustrates the qualities of a transformational leader through various scenes and themes. At the film's peak, the lions were forced to overhunt to provide food for the hyenas, which led to inadequate food for the rest of the kingdom. Simba created sustainable change through determination and teamwork to address how Scar and the hyenas were systematically oppressing the lions. With some help from a grub-eating meerkat and warthog, Simba inspired and organized the lions to fight for the restoration of the Pride Lands. Simba also took responsibility for his past and faced his role in his father's death. Once he accepted the events of the past and learned from the experience, he stepped into his role as the king of the Pride Lands.

This assignment enhanced my ability to connect theoretical frameworks to real-world leadership situations, much like a scaffolded assignment supports success on a final exam. A scholarly practitioner is defined as an educational leader who is knowledgeable in theory and can apply that knowledge to their daily practices. This assignment helps leaders train their minds to shift focus from theory to application. As leaders examine leadership qualities in a non-threatening and even engaging way, they can sharpen these skills before turning inward to assess their own practices.

Aaron's Reflections on Hardball

Becoming a Transformational Leader. In *Hardball* (O'Connor, 2001), Keanu Reeves' Conor O'Neill evolves from a reckless gambler to a caring mentor and baseball coach. His growth is driven by the realization that dangerous people are after him because of his debts, as well as by the actions of a very good friend. This major shift in perception, motivation, and understanding by the film's protagonist, Conor O'Neill, highlights the emergence of a transformational leader as O'Neill finds something to believe in with a group of 8-year-olds playing baseball in the Chicago projects.

The film's opening clearly reflects O'Neill's mindset and priorities. Late at night, he is shown sitting in a church pew, kneeling and praying for a payout on a bet that he ultimately loses. Burdened by debts to various bookies, O'Neill seeks help from a friend in the finance sector, Jimmy Fleming, for a loan. Fleming demonstrates his integrity by catching O'Neill in a lie about money, refusing to settle O'Neill's debts directly, but still finds a way to assist him. Fleming is the coach of a baseball team in Chicago's projects; for \$500 a week, he agrees to pay O'Neill to coach them.

Problems with O'Neill's leadership, or lack thereof, become evident when meeting the team. He fails to understand the children or the dangers they face in their neighborhoods, which results in one of his players being mugged for his backpack in a playground after dark. O'Neill visits Jefferson Albert Tibbs in the hospital, where Jefferson's mother sharply scolds the unthinking gambler about the safety and security of his athletes. While he is still far from being

the leader and human he will become by the movie's end, the visible shakiness of O'Neill in the scene suggests to the audience that the transformation is beginning.

O'Neill gradually wins the boys over through several montage scenes of practice, a spontaneous pizza party, securing a vehicle to take his players home after practice, and scalping tickets to a Chicago Cubs game for the team. They start winning and reach the league semi-final against a team that had embarrassed them earlier in the season. Instead of a motivational speech, O'Neill, who had recently lucked out with betting and paid off his debts, gives the team upgraded uniforms before the big game. Inspired, they take the field and tie the game late in the match. At this point, he realizes that the game's momentum depends on this moment and calls in Miles to pitch. Without his Walkman playing "Big Poppa" by Notorious B.I.G., Miles is unable to focus like he did earlier in the season and is afraid to pitch to "the best hitter in the league." Coach O'Neill goes to the dugout and starts singing the song. He begins softly, then gradually increases volume and intensity as the team joins in. With his team and coach backing him, Miles strikes out the batter on three pitches.

Keanu Reeves' portrayal of Conor O'Neill initially shows reluctance to engage with the boys on the team. Still, he is then drawn to their character, albeit through intensely colorful language, and their love and trust for him. Faced with circumstances outside his comfort zone, O'Neill exhibits the qualities of a transformational leader as he grows and develops enough to rise to the challenge of being an effective leader to a team of misfit boys, eventually teaching them and himself to become champions. He is transforming himself as a leader as he transforms the team.

Andy's Reflective Narrative on Road House

Reflecting on Authenticity and Change Agency. Authentic leadership as a theory emerged in the early 2000s in response to the turbulence of the times – political corruption, wars initiated on questionable grounds, and unprecedented natural disasters –to name a few catalysts of the movement (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These times call for the identification and development of self-aware leaders with a strong internal compass (what Bill George referred to as a "true north") that guides reasoned decision-making and fosters relational transparency (George, 2004; Northouse, 2019).

Logically, the theory of authentic leadership looks for examples and inspiration from real-world heroes of the 1980s and 1990s, including those in George's (2004) influential work on the subject. These include highly successful CEOs, political leaders like Nelson Mandela, and everyday people like Terry Fox, who, after losing a leg to cancer at 19, attempted a cross-country run in Canada to inspire support and awareness for cancer research (George, 2004). Leaders who demonstrate traits of authentic leadership can also be seen in films from that era, such as acclaimed movies like *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), where we meet Tom Hanks' Captain Miller, a humble schoolteacher who leads his hesitant squad deep into German territory to find a soldier whose brothers had all been killed in the war; and *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993), in which Oskar Schindler transforms from an opportunistic cynic into a leader willing to risk his own life to save hundreds of potential Holocaust victims.

Road House (Herrington, 1989) does not fall into this genre; it instead exemplifies the typical popcorn films of its time that juxtapose the American small-town experience with near-farcical levels of violence, mayhem, debauchery, sex, and corruption. Dalton (Patrick Swayze) is a mild-mannered and enigmatic character who specializes in maintaining order in rowdy bars and saloons. In industry language, he is a *cooler*. In this role at the Double Deuce, we quickly see Dalton show the qualities of an authentic leader. Dalton exhibits self-discipline and personal growth through the study of philosophy and practicing Tai Chi, which enable him to observe, understand, and anticipate human tendencies toward anger and violence. He is very aware of his small size and the hostility and opposition he will face from those who benefit from upholding the status quo.

During his first night on duty at the Double Deuce, we see him passively yet thoroughly observing the bar's operations, staff, and patrons. He identifies which staff members are open to change and improvement and which are unwilling to meet his standards of conduct. Above all, he advocates for courtesy, de-escalation, and collaboration as seemingly opposite approaches to addressing the lawlessness that has overtaken the establishment. In a short time, and not without some tough, hands-on effort, he and his team transform the Double Deuce into a safe and profitable place that serves the community.

Road House serves as a useful metaphor for school divisions or buildings in crisis. As the patrons and staff at the Double Deuce want to play and work in a safe and enjoyable venue, our students strive to learn, and teachers aim to teach in a secure and high-functioning environment. We often look externally for a change agent, someone with a fresh perspective who is unburdened by the weight and history of the current situation. CEOs, national leaders, and often our school leaders reach their positions through many years of service, relationship-building, and accomplishments within the same organizational structure. We hope these leaders exhibit balanced decision-making, moral perspective, relational transparency, and self-awareness, and we celebrate those who do so as authentic leaders (George, 2004; Northouse, 2019).

However, not every authentic leader can or needs to conform to this mold. As with Dalton and as our schools sometimes require, a change agent or disruptor can and should also embody these characteristics from a demonstrative rather than retrospective perspective. In this way, we view authentic leadership as a catalyst for organizational success, not merely as a description of positive outcomes.

This assignment made me think about how we evaluate leaders in real time based on their demonstrated traits. Many qualities of an authentic leader are not immediately obvious and cannot be judged solely from a leader's educational or social background. Instead, they are shown through actions, mainly decision-making, relationship-building, and behavior modeling. An organization can aim to identify and cultivate authentic leaders by using this theoretical framework as a standard for assessing both potential and current leaders.

Synthesis of Student Vignettes: Theoretical Integration and Pedagogical Impact

Taken together, the five student vignettes offer rich evidence of how film analysis can enhance theoretical understanding and leadership self-awareness among doctoral students. Through

characters as diverse as Usnavi, Chuckie Sullivan, Simba, Conor O’Neill, and Dalton, students were able to make meaningful connections between cinematic leadership stories and key frameworks in educational administration, such as transformational, authentic, democratic, and social justice leadership.

One of the most compelling through-lines across the analyses was the transformative arc each character underwent. Usnavi (*In the Heights*), Conor (*Hardball*), Chuckie (*Good Will Hunting*), Simba (*The Lion King*), and Dalton (*Road House*) all exemplify transformational leadership. They each offer examples of vision sharing, relationship building, and internal struggles in their work to foster or manage systemic change in their respective environments. Notably, each film also portrayed the obstacles and internal conflicts leaders face, such as Usnavi’s tension between individual opportunity and community responsibility, or Simba’s crisis of identity and guilt. These struggles helped students reflect on the non-linear, often emotionally complex journey of leadership.

Authentic leadership also emerged strongly, especially in Dalton’s deliberate self-awareness and integrity in *Road House*, Chuckie’s relational transparency in *Good Will Hunting*, and Simba’s internal reflection. These examples showed that authentic leadership exists not only in formal positions but also in informal influence and moral bravery, which is an essential insight for future educational leaders who often lead within complex bureaucracies. Additionally, democratic and “country club” leadership styles, particularly seen in Chuckie’s approach, reminded students that leadership does not always have to be authoritative to be effective. His example offered a model of peer-based, relational leadership that connected with school experiences.

The importance of these insights lies not only in their theoretical accuracy but also in their emotional and moral impact on aspiring and developing leaders and doctoral students. As Dewey (2005) suggested, artistic expression (and by extension film) can “break through the crust of conventional and routine consciousness” (p. 183). In this assignment, students were not only learning about leadership frameworks in a theoretical way; they were engaging in a form of experiential theory-building, where metaphor and narrative allowed them to see themselves and their contexts differently. These vignettes created space for what Hansen (2004) calls a *poetics of teaching*. Such an approach values imagination, emotion, and interpretive depth alongside intellectual analysis. These poetic activities can work in conjunction to enhance critical literacy in developing and aspiring leaders.

Moreover, by writing these reflections, students moved through Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle: they began with concrete cinematic experiences, engaged in reflective observation, constructed abstract conceptualizations using leadership theory, and prepared for future application in their professional contexts. The emotional richness and personal identification offered by film helped students access complex concepts in ways that were accessible, memorable, and meaningful.

Ultimately, this project demonstrates how film can function as a pedagogical bridge between academic theory and real-world application. By encouraging students to “find leadership” in unexpected places, the assignment validated multiple perspectives and positioned students as co-creators of knowledge. In doing so, it advanced not only their

understanding of leadership theory but also their growth as reflective, ethical, and imaginative leaders.

Discussion: Everyday Leadership, Poetic Insight, and Educational Praxis

These student-selected movie characters represent how leadership is not limited to official titles or structures. Instead, leadership often naturally arises from genuine relationships, moral courage, and the innate human desire to help others succeed. Whether the lead protagonist or supporting role, they demonstrate how loyalty, empathy, and informal influence can have a profound impact—especially when grounded in a sincere commitment to others' development. This idea is especially relevant in educational leadership, where formal authority can overshadow personal connection. Films can, therefore, provide the means for us to see leadership not only as theoretically conceptualized, but also as practically operationalized (Giroux, 2005; Jenlink, 2015; Rajpopat, 2023).

This theme resonates throughout all five student analyses in the present study. Each character (i.e., Usnavi, Chuckie, Simba, Conor O'Neill, and Dalton) serves as a mirror in which students reflect on core leadership theories, seeing them not as distant concepts but as relatable struggles. Usnavi exemplifies the blend of transformative and social justice leadership, handling internal and external community pressures with grace and resilience. Simba's story is honest and transformative, marked by profound self-reflection and a return to purpose after experiencing moral injury. O'Neill's growth in *Hardball* shows that transformational leadership is often driven not by strategic plans but by vulnerability, closeness, and love. Dalton represents the authentic leader as a change agent, providing a surprisingly detailed example of vision, discipline, and moral steadiness while facing organizational chaos and ethical dilemmas.

What connects these portraits is not their genre, context, or even theoretical neatness. Instead, it is their ability to challenge traditional views of leadership through poetic insight. Each protagonist embodies a figure in a liminal space—transitionally, complexly, or morally ambiguous—where their leadership is shaped through struggle, culture, and hard decisions. Their stories support Dewey's (2005) belief that art (and by extension, film) can "break through the crust of conventional and routine consciousness" (p. 183), encouraging new perspectives on leadership, especially for aspiring educational leaders working within bureaucratic or unequal systems.

For scholar-practitioners, this pedagogical approach has implications beyond the classroom (Jenlink, 2015). First, it models theory in practice: by analyzing leadership outside traditional domains, students learn to reframe real-world school dynamics with clarity and imagination rooted in theory (Hansen, 2004; hooks, 1994; Kolb, 1984). Second, it challenges normative assumptions about who qualifies as a leader and what leadership entails (Dei & Adhami, 2021; Jubas, 2023). Leaders are not always principals or superintendents; they can also be Connors, Daltons, or Simbas who lead informally, relationally, or redemptively. Third, this method engages the moral and aesthetic aspects of leadership, reminding us that leading involves emotion, story, and metaphor as much as systems, data, and performance metrics (Dewey, 1988, 2005; George, 2004; Giroux, 2004).

In conclusion, these vignettes show that cinema can serve as both a reflective mirror and a creative tool for developing educational leadership. As schools and communities face increasingly complex challenges, the ability to interpret and lead with moral imagination, narrative insight, and a solid theoretical foundation becomes even more critical. A willingness to creatively consider innovative and novel approaches is also becoming more essential. Therefore, by theoretically and aesthetically considering stories like Simba's, Usnavi's, and others, school leadership education can benefit practically and ethically.

References

- Affleck, B., Damon, M. (Writers), & Van Sant, G. (Director). (1997). *Good Will Hunting* [Film]. Miramax Films.
- Alegría Hudes, Q. (Writer), Chu, J. M. (Director), & Miranda, L. M. (Producer). (2021). *In the heights* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Allers, R., Minkoff, R. (Directors), & Hahn, D. (Producer). (1994). *The lion king* [Film]. Buena Vista Pictures/Walt Disney Feature.
- Brookfield S. D. (2000). The concept of critically reflective practice. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 110-126). Jossey-Bass.
- Dei (Nana Adusei Sefa Tweneboah), G. J. S., & Adhami, A. (2021). Coming to know and knowing differently: Implications of educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 58(5), 780-809. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X211036079>
- Dewey, J. (1988). *The public and its problems*. Swallow. (originally published 1927)
- Dewey, J. (2005). *Art as experience*. Perigee. (originally published 1934)
- Gatins, J. (Writer), & O'Connor, B. (Director). (2001). *Hardball* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.
- Genette, G. (2005). *Essays in aesthetics* (D. Cohn, Trans). University of Nebraska. (Originally published in 1999)
- George, B. (2004). *Authentic leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*. Jossey-Bass.
- Giroux, H. (2004). Cultural studies and the politics of public pedagogy: Making the political more pedagogical. *Parallax*, 10(2), 73-89.
- Granger, D. (2001). Towards an embodied poetics of the self: Personal renewal in Dewey and Cavell. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 20, 107–124.
- Hansen, D. T. (2004). A poetics of teaching. *Educational Theory*, 54(2), 119-142.
- Halliwell, S. (1998). *Aristotle's Poetics*. University of Chicago.
- Herrington, R. (Director), & Silver, J. (Producer). (1989). *Road house*. United Artists.
- Hofmann, R. (2020). Dialogues with data: Generating theoretical insights from research on practice in higher education. M. Tight & J. Huisman (Eds.), *Theory and method in higher education research* (6th ed., pp. 41-60). Emerald.
- hooks, b. (1995). *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. The New Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2015). Understanding leadership through poetics of leadership: Searching for personal meaning and authentic understanding. *NCPEA Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research*, 2(2), 1-34.
- Jubas, K., Sandlin, J. A., Redmon-Wright, R., & Burdick, J. (2020). Adult learning through everyday engagement with popular culture. In T. S. Rocco, M. C. Smith, R. C. Mizzi, L R. Merriweather, & J. D. Hawley (Eds.), *The handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 168-176). Routledge.
- Jubas, K. (2023). Using popular culture in professional education to foster critical curiosity and learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 55(1), 240-258. doi: 10.1080/02660830.2022.2114690
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1). Prentice-Hall.

- Ng, S. L., Mylopoulos, M., Kangasjarvi, E., Boyd, V. A., Teles, S., Orsino, A., Lingard, L., & Phelan, S. (2020). Critically reflective practice and its sources: A qualitative exploration. *Medical Education, 54*(4), 312-319. doi: 10.1111/medu.14032.
- Northouse, P. G. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (8th ed.). Sage.
- Qin, X. (2024). Collaborative inquiry in action: A case study of lesson study for intercultural education. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 9*(1), 66.
- Rajpopat, V. (2023). Use of film as a teaching resource: A literature review. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies, 2*(9), 225-233.
- Reed, G., Dagli, W., & Hambly Odame, H. (2020). Co-production of knowledge for sustainability: An application of reflective practice in doctoral studies. *Reflective Practice, 21*(2), 222–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2020.1733954>
- Sullivan, P. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis using a dialogic approach*. Sage.
- Tebaldi, C., & Nygreen, K. (2022). Opening or impasse? Critical media literacy pedagogy in a posttruth era. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, 22*(2), 143-153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086211065810>
- Ziolkowski, T. (1969). Toward a post-modern aesthetics? *Mosaic, 2*(4), 112-119.